
*A Journal of the First Assembly of the
World Council of Churches
(1): Covenanting in Prayer*

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I. Gathering at New Church

Dam Square, Amsterdam, August 22, 1948, 03:00 PM.

A considerable crowd is gathered outside the New Church, which unlike its name may suggest was built at the end of the 14th century and dedicated in 1409. The weather has improved after a grey morning of low clouds and light rain.

A procession moves slowly from the west end of the Church. The clergy are wearing official garments. Black prevails but hierarchs from the East make the procession more colourful; lay people are dressed in a great variety of national costumes; professors wear academic gowns and hoods in different colours. They are 351 delegates, representing 145 churches from 44 countries in all continents.

At the New Church, which the hosts of the event have described as “symbolic to us in Holland of the highest and most beautiful in our faith”, the opening service of the first assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) is just about to start. The service will be celebrated by members of the “Provisional Committee” which in the past ten years has led the WCC in process of creation: The French Reformed Pastor Marc Boegner; the spiritual leader of Anglicans worldwide and Archbishop of Canterbury Geoffrey Fisher; the Orthodox Metropolitan

Germanos of Thyatira, from the Patriarchate of Constantinople; and the Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala Erling Eidem. Pastor K. H. E. Gravemeyer joins them on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church and the other local hosts.

II. And the preacher is... “DT” Niles

The congregation, gathering what a WCC text described as “the faces of all the races of mankind”, sings in French “all people that on earth do dwell”, in the well-known “Old-Hundred” tune from the Geneva psalter. It will be a service expressing in its music a diversity based on the experience of oneness in Christ and the resolve to covenant in repentance for division, and for renewal and visible unity: The Orthodox hymn “Oikoumenikos” praises “the kingdom of the Son wider than nation, deeper still than race”; a young Telugu minister sings a traditional Indian thevaram before the second sermon; at the end of the service the congregation sings from the Christian students’ hymnbook *Cantate Domino* the 18th century German Catholic hymn “Holy God thy name we bless”.

The preacher will speak after John R. Mott, who 53 years ago pioneered the creation of the World Student Christian Federation. He distinguishes himself by his white robe, his age, self-confidence and origins. He is the Methodist Sri-Lankan Daniel Thambyrajah Niles, well-known in youth ecumenical circles as “D.T.” John Mott embodies the past of the ecumenical movement. D.T. Niles is a symbol of its future. Niles, the future general secretary of the Christian Conference of Asia, will preach on Moses’ response to God’s calling in the burning bush: “Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaon?” His sermon, moving between Moses at the burning bush and Christians at the cross, would later be described as “a remarkable utterance, incisive, theological, hopeful...” He will also preach at the opening service of the fourth WCC assembly, held 20 years later in Uppsala.

III. Prayer life at the assembly

Prayer will frame Amsterdam 1948. The opening and closing services will intentionally point to a real though imperfect fellowship in Christ despite existing church divisions. Daily morning prayers will be held at the rotunda Koepel Church, the copper domed church which was home for the Lutheran community of Amsterdam until 1935. Morning prayers will make manifest a diversity of confessional traditions and cultures: services will be led by delegates from different continents and traditions. The daily work of the assembly will be closed each day by a short service centred on “unity and quietness”, inspired by the predominantly musical Anglican tradition of evensong. Common to the spiritual life of the assembly will be a focus on confession of sin for persisting division inseparable from the resolve to covenant for renewal and unity.

An inter-confessional service of penitence and preparation for Holy Communion will take place on Saturday evening, 28 August. On Sunday, 29 August at the New Church the Lord’s Supper will be concelebrated by ten ministers from different Reformation churches and origins. It will be open to baptized communicant members of other churches. In the coming days the Eucharist will successively be celebrated by Anglicans, Orthodox, and Lutherans. In this way the assembly participants will be able to receive communion according to their tradition, and pray for repentance, renewal and unity as they visit the Eucharist services of other traditions.

IV. Orthodox from the Soviet Union not attending; Vatican warns against participation; Churches from the South underrepresented

Despite what the singing and preaching in the opening service are suggesting, the first WCC assembly will not be as representative of the Christian oikoumene as its

organisers have dreamed of, prayed and worked for. Metropolitan Nikolai, the head of the Church of Russia's Department of External Relations, has just informed the WCC general secretary W. A. Visser 't Hooft that, for reasons that Geneva found intriguing, the Orthodox churches of Russia, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia will not attend the assembly.

In Rome, late in the spring, the Vatican's Holy Office had issued a *monitum*, a warning against unauthorised participation of Roman Catholics in ecumenical gatherings. A third factor will limit the global character of the first assembly. The small number of delegates from the "younger" churches emerging from decolonization makes their voice virtually unheard despite the number of churches already united – like the Church of South India one year ago - or involved in church union negotiations in Asia and elsewhere.

V. "Amid the ruins of war..."

Forty years from now, in 1988, one of the assembly participants will write about the people gathered at the New Church that "amid the ruins of war, they were embarked upon a new venture". Indeed, the official decision about the new venture will be taken tomorrow morning, 23 August 1948, when the assembly will meet in plenary session at the Concertgebouw, the famous Amsterdam Concert Hall.

[This imaginary journal is based on reliable sources, among them W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches*, London, SCM Press, 1949.]